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ABSTRACT

Examining theories from a wide spectrum of disciplines, this paper categorizes research on sex differences in social behavior into four groups and examines the implications of each. The first category of research interprets sex differences as the result of anatomical differences which later affect psychological roles. The implication of this category is that sex differences are difficult if not impossible to change. The second category interprets sex differences as the result of group roles which an individual culture assigns to the different sexes. The implication of this category is that sex differences are minor and subject to change once a culture changes. The third category interprets sex differences as a process where the child develops gender identity as a part of a natural tendency to organize observations of the physical world. The fourth category interprets sex differences as the result of behavior reinforcement by parents and society. The implication of the last two categories is that sex differences can vary according to degree of sexism within a society. (Author/DE)

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Sex Differences in Social Behavior*

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*An extended version of this paper, with references, can be found as Chapter 17 in A Survey of Social Psychology (major author: Leonard Berkowitz) Dryden Press, 1975, pp. 536-60.

One of the most elementary, but fundamental, questions that social scientists (and even humanists) can ask in their study of human behavior is "Are there differences between the sexes?" Yet in many of the most pathbreaking and influential studies in the social sciences, differences between the sexes have been ignored. In some studies, data on women are not even collected. An example of this would be the research on the American occupational structure of Blau and Duncan which was based on the study of the occupational mobility of son's as compared to their fathers. The occupational trends of daughters and mothers were clearly considered irrelevant.

Or data may be collected on women (or girls) but not presented in the published findings. An example here would be the original research on achievement motivation by McClelland and Atkinson where the authors found it difficult to interpret the data on women and therefore excluded it. In still other cases, data on the two sexes are lumped together, in this way burying any potentially interesting sex differences that might have been generated. The Coleman Report on the equality of educational opportunity--the largest study of the American educational system ever undertaken--combined all the data on boys and girls.

However it is done, if no sex differences are presented, then the actual behavior of one sex (usually the female) is ignored. In many areas of research, significant sex differences may not be found (there may be as much variation within each sex group as between the two sexes) but in other areas of behavioral research, sex differences will be found and then all the possible reasons for these differences need to be explored.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that all explorations into the question "Are there differences between the sexes in social behavior?" must begin from a foundation that explains <u>why</u> the sexes differ. I shall propose, in other words, that those who carry out research on sex differences in social behavior are influenced by the type of theory that they would offer as to the causes of sex differentiation.

In essence, this paper is a mapping exercise. I have taken a large number of theories developed in a wide spectrum of disciplines (sociology, psychology, anthropology, ethology, anatomy, medicine, endocrinology and the study of feminism) and have identified three points from one or another of which all these explanations appear to begin. First I'll group the theories according to their initial points of focus and then I'll address the implications that these different points of focus generate.

Some theories on sex differences have, not surprisingly, begun with anatomy. Anatomical sex differences are determined initially by chromosomal makeup. Normally the unborn child receives one sex chromosome from each parent. A mother can give her child only an X chromosome. Whether the child receives an X or a Y chromosome from the father determines the subsequent development of ovaries for an XX or testes for an XY. It is the hormonal secretions of these glands that govern the direction of further sexual differentiation. The testicular hormone, androgen begins differentiating the male fetus at about six weeks after conception. Failing this androgenization, the fetus is female. In computer language, it's as if female is the default option, while maleness requires special programmed instructions.

If abnormal chromosomal makeup or hormonal activity causes some confusion about sex assignment, the child may be raised ambiguously and display confusion in sex-role behavior. In such anomolous cases, the person's gender identity (the awareness of self as male or female) may never be fully clarified. Those who have studied hermaphroditism disagree as to the extent to which biological factors determine gender identity. An early position of John Money and his associates based on one hundred carefully studied cases of hermaphroditism was that sex assignment and rearing, <u>not</u> biological factors, were the major causes of gender identity. A more current position is that gender identity is the result of an

interaction between biological sex and sex role assignment and rearing.

In addition, since human existence is intimately bound up with physical functions, bodily experience has psychological implications. Freud's explanation of personality development--the most comprehensive theory of how an infant acquires gender identity--begins also with anatomy. Male children who come to terms with the Oedipal conflict and female children who overcome penis envy achieve normal sexual identity. Freudian theory has, of course, been subject to endless debate.

Some of his disciples (Helene Deutsch and Marie Bonaparte to name two) took up the concept of "penis envy" and elaborated it into a theory of female passivity and masochism. Others, like Karen Horney, have largely rejected the importance of this concept. Erik Erikson concluded that there were profound differences between the sexes in the way they experience the "ground plan of their bodies". Women, he suggested, have a sense of "inner space". Erikson's theory has been widely criticized by feminists as an "anatomy is destiny" apology for women's inferior social position. In a recent re-examination of his work, Erikson still maintains that the different ground plans of male and female bodies differentially affect the socio-psychological development of the sexes; yet he recognizes that each sex may have overdeveloped its tendencies, enslaving itself and the other to stereotyped behaviors.

I would have expected that theories that take an anatomical focus would be conservative, that is to say such theories would suggest that sex differences are great and not easily subject to change. Yet the work of Money and the controversial theorizing of the Neo-Freudians suggests the very limitations of biological determinism, the thin biological line between the sexes and the great importance of social-psychological processes of early socialization and sex-role stereotypy on ultimate gender identity.

A second set of theories begin at a very different point. These have started with the study of groups and explored the roles each sex plays in these associations. Ethologists examining the behavior of male and female lower animals in varying species have tried by analogy to explain the basis of cross-sex relations in man. One ethologist, Wolfgang Wickler, holds that social behavior between the sexes precedes and determines physical structures. So, for example, while the penis evolved in very different types of animals, it is not uniform in all species. I quote "the male organ of copulation is...a subsequently evolved, auxiliary structure, which appeared on those animals whose behavior during the act of mating called for it. Accordingly, the homogeneous term "penis" refers at most to a same function," Wickler states,..."In fact, the organ of copulation evolved out of quite different existing bodily organs and in entirely different ways." For Wickler, masculinity and femininity are only relative.

Evolutionary anthropologists have also focused on the social group. Lionel Tiger for example tried to develop a picture of how the social relationships of men and women have evolved from prehistoric times. Other anthropologists have studied differences in sex roles in various primitive societies. Mead in her early work on three cultures in New Guinea took a position of extreme cultural determinism in which she concluded that it all depends on what characteristics the particular culture assigns to the sexes; sex behavior is not predetermined. Later, however, she took a functionalist position arguing that those behaviors that helped the civilization survive (procreation in women and achievement in men) are the ones that get reinforced and widely adopted.

Also using a social group approach, sociologists have looked at the American nuclear family as a specific small group and hypothesized that the husband and wife in such a family will divide the labor such that one member works on instrumental needs and the other on socio-emotional ones. Since the woman most naturally adopts the socio-emotional role in most families, the instrumental role is left for the

man. Theorists from various fields, most recently the feminists have explored the authority patterns that govern relations between the sexes. The socio-emotional role of housewife-mother so revered by the sociologists of the Fifties, was deemed by the feminists of the Sixties (like Friedan) to be a trap society had set for women--a narrow role rationalized by an elusive mystique that served men's needs but stunted those of women. Millett claimed that our male-dominated society exercised "sexual politics" to manuever women into positions that served men's interests.

This group focus which would appear to offer the most liberal explanations for sex differences, that is theories indicating that sex differences are minor and readily subject to change, has in fact generated some of the most conservative sex difference theories. Lionel Tiger began by studying men in groups and ended up with an explanation of heriditary male bonding. Margaret Mead observing the great variation in sex roles across different cultures ultimately concluded that regardless of the content of the male role, all societies found it necessary to grant achievement status to the male for his endeavors--whatever they were. The functionalist perspective that Mead's efforts helped to establish pinned the survival of societies on maintaining clearly different sex roles. Even some feminists seem not to have overcome this perspective. For while Millett would like to see the patriarchical society replaced by a non-sexist social order, her writings do not offer much optimism that such a social change may easily occur. In fact, she suggests that nothing short of revolution would achieve such an effect.

A third approach to the problem of explaining sex differences is to focus on the process that occurs when infants and children interacting with the social environment learn what it means in their culture to be a girl or a boy. All developmental theories reject the Freudian notion that the child instinctively comes to

identify with his or her same-sex parent because of innate drives. For Mischel, the actions of the infant and growing child bring forth responses--rewards and punishments--that serve to reinforce or discourage certain types of behavior. In this way, the child learns whose behavior to imitate, to repeat those behaviors that have been rewarded and to drop those that are ignored or punished. According to Mischel, major sex differences in performance are due to the fact that boys and girls set different standards for themselves in some areas of behavior.

The cognitive developmental theory of sex differentiation established by Lawrence Kohlberg holds that the child develops gender identity as a part of his natural tendency to organize his observations of the physical world around him. For example, one of the first properties associated with sex is size; and sex-role stereotypes develop in relation to the concept of size. A fairly young child will agree that father is bigger than mother. If father is bigger, he must also be stronger, and if he's bigger and stronger, then he's the boss. But there are also other cognitive tendencies to equate the self with the good. So that even though the stereotype of the adult female is inferior to that of the adult male, Kohlberg argues, it's still attractive enough for the growing girl to want to acquire it.

These theories that focus on the process of sex-role learning tend to be neutral in implication. The implications of the reinforcement theory depend on the society in which the learning takes place as to what will be reinforced. In a severely sexist society, sex-role differentiation based on social reinforcement offers little hope for liberal sex roles; but in a less sexist society the reverse could hold true. The cognitive development theory implies neutrality as well, for children's sex identities form as a part of their general mental growth. Only at the more advanced levels when the child incorporates the adult sex stereotypes into his cognitive scheme does he or she recognize the differential status of

the sexes. Again in a more or less sexist society these sterotypes would vary.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this exercise is that it suggests that theorists who begin with one focus often end up looking for explanations from another. Lionel Tiger began with the group and ended up with heredity. John Money began with chromosomal sex and ended up emphasizing the importance of early child rearing. What this suggests to me is that no one of these theories can be adequately developed until there is a unified theory of sex differences incorporating anatomy and group socialization and sex-role learning.